



Soldiers catch flat track fever!



Story by Jacqueline M. Hames



James Calder

ROLLER derby is an American-invented team sport based on formation skating around an oval track, which can be flat or banked. Played mostly by women, roller derby is an organized, if rough, sport where showmanship is a must (cue flame print knee socks). The derby is a bit of an underdog sport, only recently regaining popularity. Grassroots leagues have popped up around the nation and are gaining a small yet fiercely loyal following.

The DC Rollergirls, part of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association, was founded in 2006, and now consists of four teams: Cherry Blossom Bombshells, Scare Force One, DC DemonCats, and the Secretaries of Hate, according to the league's Web site. The league is based in Washington, D.C., and holds scrimmages regularly at the D.C. Armory. Among the ranks of the fishnet-clad Rollergirls are two Soldiers—one activated Reserve major, Melissa Mitravich, and one former Soldier, Diana Dawa.

Currently, the DC Rollergirls have many Army fans, including wounded

warriors and co-workers, who come to support their favorite teams. Mitravich said at least one group of wounded Soldiers attends every bout, and the league reserves a special section for them close to the action.

Some bouts have upwards of 1,600 spectators, but more are always welcome. It's the community support that helps keep the league finances in order—as a non-profit organization, the Rollergirls rely on volunteers and ticket sales to help run and fund matches.

"We really need people to come watch roller derby!" said Dawa, laughing.

On the track, Dawa and Mitravich skate hard and yell profanities with the rest of the pack. Off the track, they are good-humored, easy-going women with a passion for the roller derby that is only matched by their commitment to the Army.

Mitravich enlisted in the Army in 1987. After her transfer to the Reserve, she was commissioned in 1996 and is now both a registered nurse and a family nurse practitioner. She is currently assigned to the Department of the



Army Mobilization Division as a mobilization common operating picture combat developer.

"I deal with requirements and concepts...I am the government oversight for software application that deals with

Hooah!Girl blocks opposing jammer Dr. Skabs with help from ShREDica.



(Inset) Diana Dawa laughs at a fellow DemonCat's antics during a break from a scrimmage with Scare Force One, Feb. 17.



GUN'HER DOWN

all Army Reservists that are mobilized," Mitravich explained.

Sporting a tattoo on one ankle and using the nickname "Gun'Her Down," the job description comes as somewhat of a surprise. However, Mitravich explains there are all kinds of women in the derby: zookeepers, teachers, Soldiers and chief executive officers among them.

"If you love sports, if you love contact, adrenaline rush—this is a sport any woman can do," she said.

"When I go into the Army and I get to do my job, especially in the medical field, whether I am ER or I am working on the floor, for me it's a rush. I love my job, I love dealing with Soldiers" despite their injuries, Mitravich said. "It makes me feel good and it's always a challenge."

"I've been really lucky that my Army family has really supported me in this," she added. "Most of them are here watching the bouts."

Two years ago, Mitravich watched a match with a friend and discovered that rush of adrenaline anew—on skates. She was not able to join immediately because she was mobilized, but once in the Washington area, another friend introduced her to the Rollergirls. She was "drafted" onto Scare Force One in October 2008 and has been loving derby ever since.

"It's one of those things where you can actually hit somebody and know

you're not going to get arrested. I mean it's awesome!" Mitravich joked.

During a bout, the women skate around the track and slam into one another like runaway bumper cars, though there is no hair pulling, biting or elbowing as some movies would have us believe. That would lead to a penalty.

Each team has five skaters on the track: three blockers, one pivot and one jammer. Positions are designated by helmet covers, and any player can play any position. Jammers have starred covers, pivots have striped, and blockers are coverless.

Pivots and blockers form the pack, the main force of the game, and jammers trail 20 feet behind to start. Pivots set the pace of the pack, Mitravich explained, while jammers score points by lapping the pack. Blockers prevent the opposing team's jammers from getting through the pack—using hip checks and shoulder bumps—and help their own jammers get through. The goal is to score the highest amount of points over a 30-minute period, which is broken into two-minute intervals,

called jams.

"I really enjoy the flat track because I think it adds a little bit more of a familiar and personal level to it. The audience is allowed to sit 10 feet from the track when the action is going on," Dawa said.

It's an especially personal experience when Dawa sends an opposing team member staggering into the audience—an event that gives her a "rush."

Dawa, known as "Hooah!Girl" on the DC DemonCats, had an affair with derby at an early age, watching it on Saturday mornings when she was young. As an adult she was introduced to derby through a friend who is on the team with her now. After going to a league meeting, she was hooked.

"My favorite moments are the athleticism, working out, being able to go really fast on the track and actually hitting people and not having to apologize for that. Everybody here is very aggressive, some more so than others," Dawa said.

Dawa enlisted in the Army immediately after high school graduation and eventually became a combat cam-

Maj. Melissa Mitravich, also known as Gun'Her Down, hashes out player positions with a member of Scare Force One before a scrimmage at the D.C. Armory, Feb. 17.



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eraman in Korea, then a broadcaster in Germany. After leaving the military in 1992, she became an Army civilian. She returned to the U.S. Army in 2002 and is currently a public affairs specialist with the Army Materiel Command. Her derby nickname is a tribute to the experience and education she received in the Army.

"The Army literally saved my life. I just wanted to give something back. It's my own little way of making people say 'Hooah' without knowing what they are saying," Dawa said with a grin.

The Army has some similarities to roller derby that help make these women feel right at home on the track. Among them, Dawa and Mitravich agree, is a strong sense of sisterhood. Mitravich describes the league as a second family.

"Everybody helps everybody else," Dawa added.

Roller derby is very organized like the Army, Dawa explained. The league has committees and many leadership positions, lending it a military air. "A lot of the organizational structure that was in the military that appealed to me

is also in roller derby, which really appeals to me as well," Dawa said.

Getting on the track and skating a bout can be likened to a combat mindset, though Mitravich emphasizes that combat missions and derby bouts cannot be directly compared. She explained that skaters need an overall awareness of the track, the referees, and the position of all the skaters, similar to a Soldier's awareness of his or her surroundings in the field.

Soldiers have a general plan and expectations for the mission, Mitravich said, but have to be able to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. Derby skaters need the same mental agility, or "pack awareness," in order to perform well on the track. "This is by far the hardest sport I have ever played in my life because it requires an offense-defense mind at the same time," Mitravich said.

Both Dawa and Mitravich hope that the Army may put together its own derby team in the future, including both male and female athletes.

"I think it's the right kind of atmosphere that promotes empowerment,

and promotes leadership skills, so I think it would be perfect," Dawa said.

For more information on the DC Rollergirls, visit www.dcrollergirls.com. ♦



Jammers, Gun'Her Down and Blonde Fury race off the jam line.

Hooah!Girl leads the DC DemonCat line-up.

